THE RAGTIME SOCIETY

DEDICATED TO THE PRESERVATION OF CLASSIC RAGTIME

P.O. BOX 8 KING, ONT., CANADA

Volume 5, Number 1 February, 1966

"Concert in Ragtime" continues to sell at a phenomenal rate; in fact, the initial pressing is all but sold out and we've had to order a second pressing. Reaction to the album has been unanimously favorable. Here are some comments from satisfied customers:

"The Arpin record is every bit as good as the advance publicity claimed. Arpin is the Richter of ragtime! His technique and dynamics put him at the summit! The choice of selections is varied and just right." Bill Mitchell

"A comment on the Arpin recording -- words cannot express the endless pleasure this recording has given us all. Public response from our listeners (radio station CHUC, Cobourg, Ont.) was really great -- especially for legit rag and not the usual commercial bumff they hear." Ken Vinen

"The Arpin album is splendid." Robert Blay

"Makes one want to take up basket weaving, but it certainly shows what ragtime sounds like in the hands of a virtusoso and gives us all something to aim for." John Fairhead

"Lived up to its advance notices and then some." Tom Ross

"The Arpin LP is great. I have had some fun playing his version of Joplin's BETHENA WALTZ for members of my family who are strictly Chopin and Brahms fans -- they knew that it wasn't Chopin, but the classical style of the piece and Arpin's expert technique had them quite puzzled as to the composer and period." John Munday

And from a personal letter to John: "It's lovely, lyrical -- a style of playing ragtime that I did not know existed . . . I urge you to record more ragtime and sincerely believe that your style will give it the respectability and attention it deserves." Stephen Wright

Letters like these are very gratifying to all of us, and particularly to John. They make the thousand and one problems involved in producing a record seem very much worth while. Needless to say, a second John Arpin album is well into the planning stage, and we'll keep you posted.

PERFORMERS

The genial gent at the left is Society member Don Burns of Buffalo who is resident "Professor" at the newly-opened Johnnie's Old Time Saloon, 64 Young Street in Tonawanda.

Mike Reagan tells us that this little saloon just last year was a long narrow one-room bar with a mostly silent Nickelodeon Piano and a few local patrons. Since the night Don Burns stopped in for a fast beer about 10 months ago (and didn't leave until he had played several ragtime favorites) much has happened. Johnnie bought the adjoining store and immediately began converting it into an Old Time Saloon under Burns' direction. At present if you want to get in the front door on a Saturday night you have to get there before 10 p.m.

Having heard Don play at the first Society "bash," we can understand his popularity. If you're in the area, drop in an say hello to Don. Johnnie's is open Thursday, Friday and Saturday and features draft beer and shell peanuts.

Local John Arpin fans will be happy to hear that John is re-opening at the Last Chance Saloon (Ports of Call) in Toronto on February 15th (Tuesday). He'll be playing the early evening set - 5:30 to 8:30 - and it's a solo gig so get all those requests lined up. We'll see you there!

Tex Wyndham, Wilimington, Delaware, sent us a clipping about his group - The Red Lion Jazz Band - consisting of cornet, clarinet, trombone, piano, banjo, bass horn (helicon) and drums. The band plays in the San Francisco style and they don't do any rags - yet. Mostly old jazz and pop tunes from the twenties. Tex says that fellow Society members John Hill of Broomall, Pa., and Virginia Hayne of Drexel Hill, Pa., came down to see the show and they spent the intermission discussing ragtime.

K. W. Mayhercy of Denver, professionally known as "Ragtime" Dollar Bill, is the regular at the Holiday Inn in Laramie, Wyoming, after 11 weeks at the North Platte, Nebraska, Holiday Inn. He reports they have good rooms and may become part of the plains circuit.

Gil Lieberknecht tells us that Omaha enjoyed the performance of "Ragtime Bob" Darch at the Gas Lamp until the 15th of December, and is eagerly looking forward to Bob's return on April 4th, 1966.

Karl Leaf has changed jobs recently and is now at the Pizza Palace in Oxnard, California, a suburb of Ventura or vice versa. With Karl on weekends is banjoist and Society member Phil Snyder. "We also have a fine male singer who sings a great song. We are doing a lot of oldies with the singer like Chesapeake Bay, What Did Robinson Crusoe Do With Friday On Saturday Night, Sailing Down the Old Green River, and so on."

Lorne McEachnie, Toronto, kindly sent us this Morath article from the 60th anniversary edition (January 5) of Variety:

Up From Ragtime

Pop Music's Transition, by Courtesy (And Genius) of Electronics

By MAX MORATH

I'll promise you one thing at the top of this column—no nostalgia. Though I am professionally wrapped up in the performing and writing styles of the ragtime era, I don't look at it nostalgically. Enthusiasm and affection for the era, I've got, nostalgia I don't. How can I? I wasn't there. If you catch me anywhere near that tired and untrue canard, "they just aren't writing them like they used to," condemn me to a 10-a-day gig in an unventilated variety hall at $27.50 a week for the summer of 1907.

Now, granted that revolutions in the style and form of popular music *have* taken place since ragtime was king, who is responsible? In similar revolutions of greater and lesser importance you can generally spot a handful of key men who led the way. I suggest that this is true in the world known as Tin Pan Alley. Find the key men, that handful of innovators who made the big breakthroughs, and you can chart the convulsions of the business with ease.

Their names should come as no surprise. They're well known to anybody in the music business and to practically everybody: Thomas Alva Edison, Lee DeForest, Guglielmo Marconi, Frank Sprague, and David Sarnoff, to name a few.

The more you study our changing vogue and styles in popular music, the more you are forced to conclude that the changes usually resulted from forces outside the music business—the same forces that have reshaped every other phase of American life in the years since the turn of the century —science and invention. Thus Edison and his confreres have unwittingly changed our popular music standards far more than any of the great names within the business. My hypothesis, anyway.

And by the way, seen thus as both a reflection and a product of American life, popular music becomes a most exact and exciting voice of America, for it contains at its best not only the many attractions of music for its own sake, but a continuing soundtrack for this fascinating nation of ours.

Now to those inventions. Start with the piano. Without the perfection and quantity production of that new (to the late 19th Century) type of piano, the dependable, sturdy and inexpensive upright, those gaslit parlors would have had no keyboards. (Who could afford a grand?) No pianos, no sheet music business, which of course, was the backbone of the infant music business.

End of the Line

Next, the trolley car. It's true. No question that *dance* vogues influence the rules and regulations of songwriting, is there? (If so, try selling waltzes to a discotheque manager.) All right, the trolley car was in the front lines of our first big dance revolution, when ragtime dances—the Turkey Trot, the Bunny Hug, the Camel Walk and all the others in that zoo—swept out the Victorian two-step and three-steps around 1910-15. And where did the kids dance? At home? At the church social? Not on your Pierce-Arrow radiator cap, buddy. Dancing was too sinful. No, there was a new place, the dancehall. And it was often as not at the end of the trolley line, out in the boondocks, away from the watchful eyes of Ma and Pa. The dancehall was usually owned by your friendly trolley line, part of an amusement park maybe, put out there to build up a new line. Thus Frank Sprague (the Tom Edison of the trolley) joins our list.

Then, just as the century turns, comes the phonograph. (First, shed a tear for the soon-to-be-busted publisher, confiding to his pals over a stein of Ehret's in 1901, that the gramaphone is a passing fad, guys, take it from me.)

The phonograph changed the music business in a most obvious way. Sheet music sales skidded but record sales soared. But what does that have to do with the writer? Isn't he still turning the same crank?

No. For the first time he is holding a stopwatch; the two-minute time limit is on and the Tin Pan Alley pro begins to hear, "Forget the six sets of lyrics for the 32 bar verse, Charlie. Give us a quick 16-bar verse and we'll finish out with two snappy choruses." Goodbye verse.

The four-minute cylinder and the longer-playing Edison disk notwithstanding, the limit settled at about three minutes during the long sway of the 78 and it dictated writing standards for years, until the LP and the 45 came along. Then the time limits went way up for some musicians and down again for others.

Jazz

The LP opened the doors to extended works and kicked off a whole new trend for the serious jazz musician. But the writer for the single market today comes in again with his two minutes-worth. Not because we cant get a lot more grooves on that little disk, but because another influential invention says, keep it short, baby, we have 27 commercials and then the weather.

So to another bunch of peripheral heroes (or villains) of the music business — those genuises who invented, then mass-produced, automated and miniaturized radio gear, sending the number of radio stations upwards toward infinity since World War II and creating, not only new markets, but the greatest promotion device ever for popular music.

(The paradoxes of this business! I started out as a radio announcer in 1946 just as a radio doctrine astonishing to contemplate today, was phasing out. Play *records* on the air? Unthinkable. Fine quality 16-inch transcriptions or *live* music were fine, but broadcast scratchy, fragile low-fi phonograph records? Uh-huh. Think of it. How the devil did Billy. Murray and Gene Austin ever sell all those millions of copies?)

The Mike

Now consider the microphone, the focus of a whole series of developments—the whole wild scene of sound captured. Try to imagine great orchestral section work, or any articulated sound mixture without mikes. Invention again dictates to style, or in this case, opens new avenues for imaginative arrangers and composers.

Or consider the effect of these inventions on lyrics—the microphone, amplifier, loudspeaker. They changed the whole concept of the lyric, no longer to be shouted or demanding the powerful, operatic voice, but intimate now, private and literate. It happened and if you doubt it, try to picture Sinatra delivering a typically subdued and tasty Sammy Cahn lyric through a megaphone in a chautauqua tent.

Amplification! Who would deny that the r&r sound and fury of today's market could have occurred without the next step in amplification — that of the individual instruments themselves.

I close, convinced by the way, that the ragtime era begs for rediscovery and reevaluation in today's material-hungry market, and that it is due the noncaricatured, in-depth revival it deserves. But when it comes, in all its syncopated glory, I hope to hear new versions of those classic rags and irrepressible songs via tapes and tweeters, stereo and eight-track recording heads. You may even find me in the thick of it, playing Fender-piano.

The ragtime era is a great place to visit, but I certainly wouldn't want to live there.

SHEET MUSIC

The next mailout to the Reprint Club should coincide with this issue, and will include the last page of PEACEFUL HENRY which was omitted from the last mailing. Our apologies. Selections are as follows:

Apple Jack - Some Rag (Johnson)

Wall Street Rag (Joplin)

X. L. Rag (Settle)

King Chanticleer (Ayer)

Sleepy Hollow Rag (Woods)

These numbers are also available to non-members of the Reprint Club at $1 each postpaid, except X. L. RAG which is 50¢. Minimum order is $2.

COMMENT
COMMENT

"I was tickled with the comments you printed in the recent Newsletter regarding my own observations. It is good that the Society is tolerant of different shades of opinion. I was also reminded of the aphorism, 'Never do unto others what you would have them do unto you; their tastes may not be the same.'" -Frederick B. Glaser, M.D., Lexington, Kentucky

"If I were responsible for editing the Newsletter, I would seriously consider holding back any technical advice from piano technicians or piano 'tooners' (as some are called). I would check, first, with a reputable local piano technicians organization such as the Piano Technicians Guild.

"I have in mind the remarks by Charles B. Davis, Jr. in the Nov-Dec issue of the Newsletter, quote: 'Also be wary of the piano tuner who uses an electronic instrument called a strobe because if he depends wholly on it the piano will be set in perfect pitch. The strings are then robbed of their overtones, which produce the sound color of the instrument. However, the strobe is very good when used to set the temperament.'

"His remarks reflect a lack of knowledge as regards the use of the strobe. Also, he does not consider the misrepresentation and the harm that can be done by casting reflections against an honest technician who knows how to use a strobe. A piano can be tuned 100% by a person who knows how to use the strobe (as can be amply demonstrated). We should no more be 'wary of the man with a strobe' than of a man with a tuning hammer if he cannot use either one.

"No piano is tuned to 'perfect pitch' either by ear or by strobe — it's impossible. Also -- to say that we can 'rob a string of its overtones' is completely false. We might 'rob a string' of proper phasing or pitch of overtones, but never the overtones themselves.

"He contradicts himself when saying that we can 'use a strobe in the temperament.' Why just in the temperament -- which is the most vital and important section of the piano — if not in the rest of the keyboard?

"In defense of the technician who takes advantage of modern technology and instruments, I would say that Mr. Davis' remarks were unfounded, misrepresentation of facts." -L. Harrison, Geneva, New York

Corners, gentlemen. First, as to our editorial policy — quite likely we should check out our copy as Mr. Harrison suggests, but holy Batmobile, we just ain't geared for it. Therefore we publish letters, such as those from Mr. Davis and Mr. Harrison, as technical opinion and presume that readers will accept them as such. As our two correspondents have shown, there are two sides to every opinion; we would much rather explore both sides than to avoid a subject entirely.

If we have caused any confusion or doubt by our policy, we regret it; however, if our personal reaction is any guide, piano technicians and tuners have little to fear. Our friendly local piano tuner uses a strobe from one end of our piano to the other. We will continue to have him tune our piano whether he uses a strobe, a tuning hammer or a crowbar, simply because he is a helluva nice guy who does a good tuning job for a reasonable price. -Ed.

TREEMONISHA

"Is there still no hope of TREEMONISHA being published? I should think there might be more interest since Sam Charters' record came out." -Amelia Ramsey, Stockton, N.J.

How about a show of hands? All those interested in having Joplin's opera published, please tell us as soon as possible.

FROM OUR SWEDISH CORRESPONDENT

"One of the last links with the beginning of ragtime in Sweden was broken a few weeks ago when a 73-year old merchandiser by the name of Gerhard Öhrn suddenly passed away. He was responsible for the introduction and spreading of most of the ragtime and jazz that reached Sweden between 1907 and circa 1928.

"I met him a few years ago -- he was a small, blimp-shaped man, always very earnest and kind, and always buzzing around amidst a bundle of activities that only seemed to increase with his age. I spent several afternoons with him, listening to his reminiscenses about the starting days of his music career, listening to his pianola, or hearing him play his old banjo recordings on his gramophone, he pointing out styles or little tricks of the different performers (his way of knocking these valuable discs around almost gave me a heart attack at times!)

"Gerhard Öhrn was actually a mandolin player, but also a five-string banjoist. It was wonderful to hear him talk about the days around 1907, when rags and cake-walks first came here -- how it took some time before anybody could play them at all ('they had such terrible sense of rhythm in those days,' he said), how he got more and more interested in the music, and finally managed to get arrangements with most U.S. publishers (including Stark) to get music as fast as it was coming out.

"The first jazz-ragtime band he heard in Sweden was in 1913 or thereabouts -- a piano-saxophone-drum trio with a colored pianist by the name of Grotton or something like that. The guy seemed to be rather the sensational sort of musician, as he played not only with his hands but with his feet also! Most musically, Mr. Öhrn assured me. At any rate, shortly afterward the first Swedish jazz-ragtime band came into existence -- a strange affair consisting to a large extent of banjos and drums. It was very successful around Göteborg, and Mr. Öhrn organized several bands with interchanging personnel who often had to get around the city in taxicabs to fill in several jobs a night. Later on, Mr. Öhrn changed to other objects for his business, but after his retirement he again took up ragtime as a hobby. In these last years, he picked up his banjo and began practising, and at the time of his death he had several young banjoists taking lessons from him." -Peter Lundberg

DOCTORED PIANO

"Re the tinny honky-tonk sound effect, you might suggest this: try slipping a piece of paper between the strings and hammers. This gives a very tinny effect with no damage to a good piano. I found newspaper too soft - a standard piece of sheet music seemed to be just heavy enough to stand up and yet not mute the strings too much." -Helen Hirsch, Los Angeles, California

Mrs. Hirsch, who is Karl Leaf's sister, tells us she was playing ragtime back in the late teens and early twenties, although just a kid. She and Karl played for dances in Seattle in the early days, and she still "sits in" whenever she visits Karl on the job. Helen's plans for resuming her musical career were interrupted when she broke her back recently, but she's recovering nicely and limbering up at the keyboard. She hopes to make a record as soon as she is fully recovered, and we look forward to hearing it.

FROM THE MAILBAG

John Munday, Illinois: "The Campus Folksong Club took its first look at ragtime last fall through a lecture-concert it presented on the University of Illinois campus. Your Society is being mentioned to all who were interested in that concert, as well as being mentioned in our Club magazine, 'The Autoharp.'" Many thanks for the assists, John.

Peter Lunberg, Sweden: "Henri Parisot's article was fine -- we need more compilations like that. (page 45, Sept-Oct, 1965) A few additions could be made, like the new Riverside issue of twelve Scott Joplin rolls. Also it should be mentioned that the London series is long since (alas) extinct -- though a lot of the material has reappeared on Riverside. The only mistake is the ATLANTA RAG which is played by Cow Cow Davenport, not Jabo Williams."

Tom Ross, Beloit, Wisconsin: "Regarding Ray Turner, I have in my collection a 10" LP -- Capitol H-306, KITTEN ON THE KEYS -- in which Turner is accompanied by Phil Stephens, bass, and Nick Fatool, drums. It is a group of novelties including Kitten on the Keys, Rufenreddy, Coaxing the Piano, Dizzy Fingers, Canadian Capers, Pianoflage, and Greenwich Witch. Pianists who have heard it could only shake their heads in wonder — this is technique plus."

Ken Vinen, Cobourg, Ontario: "Player piano business is booming. In my shop at this moment, I have two players from Komoka near London. It's amazing how well the reputation is spreading. I am getting work from all over the place -- at times more than I think I can cope with, but love every minute of it.

"If anyone in the Society gets a machine that needs fixing, I will be glad to oblige -- no matter what size, shape or kind. Just give me a holler. (Box 520, Cobourg, Ontario. -Ed.) The worst one I have ever done is a 1925 Wurlitzer Military Band Organ -- it was really in tough shape."

Treemonisha Revisited

by John Hill.

Not long ago the Society abandoned an attempt to produce a limited edition of Treemonisha, the Joplin folk opera published in 1911 by Joplin himself. The project failed for one very basic reason -- there simply were not enough subscriptions to pay for the production and mailing expenses at a price the Society felt would be reasonable (about $15.00). Ever since the collapse of the original project there have been occasional letters of inquiry about "the status of Treemonisha": some from the original subscribers; some from members no doubt stimulated by the PORTENTS 3 Album (see the RAGTIME REVIEW, Vol IV #2 p.11 & RAGTIME SOCIETY Newsletter, Vol IV #5 p. 43) or Trebor Tichenor's Tape (RAGTIME REVIEW Vol IV #4 p.6); and others from the growing list of new members. All of this suggests that it is time to ask, is there now enough interest in Treemonisha to permit the Society to proceed with this rather heroic undertaking ?

Briefly, here are some of the details. For the price of $15.00 or less (depending on the total number of subscribers) you would receive:-

1. The 234 page opera in 3 acts, complete with voice line, libretto and piano accompaniment plus the title page (see Ragtime Society Newsletter Vol II #10, Dec. '63 for sample)

2. The entire opera would be printed on medium weight paper, both sides, approximately 9"x12". The process to be used would be photo offset, same quality as the Society's current REPRINT SERIES.

3. The pages would come to you in order, but unbound. If desired, standard spaced holes can be included for insertion in a 3 ring binder. A Majority vote by subscribers would decide this question.

The project will again be undertaken in three steps (I, Polling; II, Fund Raising; III, Production, Assembly and Mailing), each dependent on the successful completion of the preceding. In this way we should be able to set up realistic timetables so we will know where we stand and can give you periddic progress reports.

Stage I begins when you read this announcement and ends on April 30, 1966. If you are interested in having a copy of Treemonisha, why not invest 5¢ right now in a card or letter addressed to :

John Hill,
2038 Springhouse Road,
Broomall, Penna. 19008.

Please feel free to include any comments, suggestions, complaints, criticisms or questions pertinent to the project. Because of the size of Treemonisha we can print only as many copies as there are subscriptions, and when orders are filled, there will be no extra copies to pick up later as with the Reprint Club.

For additional information you can refer to the chapter in 'They All Played Ragtime', or to Vol II #10, and Vol III #2 through 7 of the Society Newsletter.

Remember, it can't be done without your support, so think it over, talk it up, and KEEP THOSE CARDS & LETTERS COMING IN !!!